

Christian Charged with 'Blasphemy' in Pakistan Denied Bail

A judge has denied bail to a young Christian man charged with desecrating the Koran under Pakistan's controversial **blasphemy laws** despite the lack of evidence against him, sources said.

Police in Shahdara, near Lahore, had arrested 23-year-old Khuram Masih on Dec. 5 and charged him with desecrating the Quran after his landlord, Zulfiqar Ali, alleged that he had burned pages of the book in order to prepare tea. Section 295-B makes willful desecration of the Quran or use of an extract in a derogatory manner punishable with life imprisonment.

Masih's previous lawyers, Muhammad Farhad Tirmizi and Liaquat John, on Jan. 3 petitioned for his bail. In their petition, they stated to Additional Sessions Judge Anjum Raza Syed that police had registered a false case against Masih based on hearsay, and that police had not found any incriminating evidence.

Judge Syed, however, refused to grant bail to Masih on grounds that the case was "very sensitive, and bail to the accused would fan religious sentiments and cause a great mishap."

Asif Aqeel, executive director of the Community Development Initiative (CDI), an affiliate of the European Centre for Law and Justice, told Compass that the lawyers hired by Masih's relatives should not have petitioned the trial court for Masih's bail so soon.

"There's no use moving for bail in the trial court, because the lower courts cannot sustain pressure in such cases," Aqeel said. "The judges in trial court are under extreme pressure from religious quarters and simply cannot set a **blasphemy**

accused free on bail after just a month of the incident.” He added that, similarly, trial courts in blasphemy cases tend to deliver guilty verdicts due to the same pressures from Muslims.

CDI lawyer Niaz Amer, who has now acquired Masih’s power of attorney, would make efforts for his bail in the Lahore High Court once the proceedings begin, Aqeel added.

“It is very unfortunate for those accused of blasphemy, but this is how the legal system of Pakistan operates,” he said. ‘The accused have to spend several months, even years, in jail without bail, just because the judges are unwilling to put their own lives at risk from **religious extremists**.”

In their petition for bail, Masih’s lawyers stated that in First Information Report (FIR) No. 1211/2011, complainant Ali had claimed that Masih’s neighbors had tried to stop him from burning the pages of the Koran and had ignored their requests, and that the Christian ran away when Ali arrived at his home.

“It is further alleged in the FIR that the petitioner [Masih] was arrested later from the same spot when the police arrived,” the bail application states, adding that the charges against Masih were concocted and baseless because the complainant had not witnessed the alleged incident. No other person is mentioned in the FIR to substantiate the allegations.

At the same time, Napoleon Qayyum, a **Christian rights advocate** and field officer of CDI, denied reports that Masih has been tortured or mistreated by prison authorities.

“Someone has misreported that Masih has been tortured at the District Camp Jail, where he is currently being held,” Qayyum said. ‘I am in regular contact with Masih and his family, and he has not been harmed by anyone in jail.”

Masih has said that he was falsely accused in the case because

he had had an argument with his landlord, Ali, earlier in the day over the rent of the house in which he and his wife, Bano, a convert from Hinduism, lived along with five other families.

A **Christian rights activist** in Shahdara, Khalid Shahzad, had earlier told Compass that police had shown unnecessary haste in registering the case.